

Spin, strangeness, and charm

Politics, media bias, science, and psychology

PLO head honcho in 1977: “Palestinian identity is just a tactical ploy”

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There is an amusing story (probably apocryphal) about Zvi Yechezkeli, the Channel 10 Arab Affairs correspondent, giving a lecture at Bir-Zeit University in the West Bank. He starts off with a story (he speaks Arabic fluently) about Moses (“Mussa” for them) climbing on Har Nevo, seeing the Promised Land, and bathing in the Jordan. When he comes out his clothes were missing.

“And Moses said: The Palestinians have stolen my clothes!”

Students yell out in protest: “But there were no Palestinians then!”

Yechezkeli: “OK, now that we have established that, I can start my lecture.”

[...]

The truth of the matter is, the concept of a “Palestinian” national identity is a fairly recent one in Arab politics: I know older people in Israel who remember when the word just meant: a resident of the British Mandate of Palestine. (They were never able to sell Jews on that name: British coins from the era list the Hebrew acronym for Eretz Yisrael/Land of Israel next to “Palestine” in English and “Falasteen” in Arabic.)

The only other entity called “Palestine” that ever existed in the region was of course when the Romans, after the Second Jewish Revolt/Bar-Kochba Rebellion in 132-135 CE, punitively renamed the province of Judea as “Palestina” after the Philistines/Pelishtim, a Mediterranean seafaring people that used to live in the area of Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gaza. (Ashkelon, or Ascalion as the Romans called it, was a major port city in Roman times: an interesting archeological park in the city is well worth visiting.) Needless to say, the Philistines no longer existed then, and today’s “Palestinians” are unrelated. During the Ottoman Empire, the whole area — sparsely populated then, as Mark Twain relates in “Innocents Abroad” — wasn’t even a separate province but just part of the *sanjak* (Ottoman province) of Southern Syria.

When Israel was born, pan-Arabism was king. The “Palestinian Liberation Organization” (PLO) was only founded in 1964, with a flag that is basically the Jordanian flag with the 7-pointed star removed. (A variant was also the flag of the short-lived Hejaz kingdom that preceded Saudi Arabia.)

I have always suspected that the sudden stress on a nebulous “Palestinian” national identity was a propaganda ploy for marketing purposes. Several websites, however (e.g., [this one](http://likud.nl/1977/03/we-are-palestinians-just-for-a-political-objective-likoed-nederland/) (<http://likud.nl/1977/03/we-are-palestinians-just-for-a-political-objective-likoed-nederland/>)), refer to a 1977 interview by Zuhair Mohsen, then the leader of one wing of the PLO, where *he basically openly says so*. The quote that is circulating on the Internet appears to be a roundtrip translation, but a Dutch-speaking friend sent me a scan of the original newspaper article [Trouw, March 31, 1977, “Wij zijn alleen Palestijn om politieke redenen”], accompanied by his English translation: being fluent in Dutch, I can vouch for the translation. Here goes, starting from the 4th column, and the heading “Geen volk” (not a people):

NOT A PEOPLE

According to Mohsen there is in fact no separate Palestinian people. “Between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese there are no differences. We are part of one people, the Arab nation. Look: I have family members with Palestinian, Lebanese, Jordanian, and Syrian citizenship. We are one people. Only for political reasons we carefully stress our Palestinian identity. Namely, it is of national importance for the [struggle of the] Arabs against Zionism to foster the existence of the Palestinians. **Yes, the existence of a separate Palestinian identity is there only for tactical reasons.** The foundation of a Palestinian state is a new means for continuing the struggle against Israel and for Arab unity.”

Mohsen’s logic is actually very simple: “Because Golda Meir states that there is no [such thing as a] Palestinian people, I say that there is a Palestinian people, distinct from Jordan.”

STRATEGY

Also the strategy Mohsen wants to follow is very simple: “A separate Palestinian entity should stand up for the national rights in the then remaining occupied territories. The Jordanian government cannot speak for Palestinians in Israel, Lebanon, or Syrian. Jordan is a state with defined border. It cannot lay claim to, for example, Haifa or Jaffa, Jerusalem, or Beersheba. Jordan can only speak on behalf of Jordanians and the Palestinians on Jordan. The Palestinian state would have the right to act on behalf of all Palestinians in the Arab world and elsewhere. Once we will have acquired our rights in all Palestine, we must not delay the reunification of Jordan and Palestine for a single moment.”

One need not wonder why postmodern academics are often so enamored with the Palestinian cause, since they are so in love with “constructed” identities. (The acronym “conlang” for “constructed language” comes to mind ;))

Here (thanks to my daughter) is [a more recent example](http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/3389.htm) (<http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/3389.htm>): (Arabic TV clip, subtitles by MEMRI): a Hamas spoketool pleads with the Egyptians to donate more money, fuel, etc. and in trying to convince them, says:

We are your brothers. Half of the Palestinians are Egyptians and the other half Saudis.

Mais bien sûr. It has never been about building a home for a constructed nation called “the Palestinians”: it has always been about delegitimizing, demonizing, and trying to destroy the only country in the region that is *not* under Islamic rule. Even the leftist academic, Camp David negotiator, and onetime foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami exasperatedly reached that conclusion (“End of the road”, Haaretz, September 14, 2001: English translation [here](http://www.scottishfriendsofisrael.org/camp_david.htm) (http://www.scottishfriendsofisrael.org/camp_david.htm)).

But when all is said and done, after eight months of negotiations, I reach the conclusion that we are in a confrontation with a national movement in which there are serious pathological elements. It is a very sad movement, a very tragic movement, which at its core doesn't have the ability to set itself positive goals.

"At the end of the process, it is impossible not to form the impression that the Palestinians don't want a solution as much as they want to place Israel in the dock of the accused. More than they want a state of their own, they want to denounce our state. [Missing from translation: "In the deepest sense of the word, theirs is a negative ethos."] **That is why, contrary to the Zionist movement, they are incapable of compromising. Because they have no image of the future society that they want and for which it is worth compromising.**

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